

Lesson 51

Last week we read verses 10-14, which give us a beautiful description of the church. What does that beautiful description tell us about the church? Verse 11 tells us that the church has the glory of God. Verse 11 tells us that the church has a light like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Verse 12 tells us that the church has a great high wall with twelve gates and twelve angels, with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on the twelve gates, and verse 13 tells us that there are three gates on each side. Verse 14 tells us that the wall has twelve foundations with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

We ended class last week with a question. Does this description fit with what the rest of the Bible has to say about the church? Yes, it does.

***Ephesians 2:19-22** — Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon **the foundation of the apostles and prophets**, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*

***Ephesians 3:21** — Unto him be **glory in the church** by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.*

***Ephesians 5:27** — That he might present it to himself a **glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing**; but that it should be holy and **without blemish**.*

***Colossians 1:12-13** — Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us **from the power of darkness**, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.*

1 Timothy 3:15 — *But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, **the pillar and ground of the truth.***

Hebrews 12:28 — *Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which **cannot be moved**, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.*

What the description here in Chapter 21 is telling us about the church is what those verses tell us about the church. The church shows the glory of God. The church is the kingdom of light. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth. The church has a strong foundation and cannot be moved.

What do the great high walls in verse 12 tell us about the church? They tell us that the church is protected by God. They tell us that the church can rest secure in the promises of God.

What do the twelve gates tell us about the church? They tell us that people can enter the kingdom of God, which we know happens when they obey the gospel and are added by God to the church (Acts 2). But they also tell us that people can leave the kingdom of God if they prove faithless and have their names blotted out of the book of life (Revelation 2-3).

What do the names of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles tell us about the church? They tell us that the church consists of the faithful people of God, both those who were faithful under the new covenant and those who were faithful under the old covenant (Ephesians 2).

Why are we told that each of the four sides has three gates? That description emphasizes the symbolic meaning of the number twelve, which is three times four. Three is the symbolic number for God, and four is the symbolic number for God's creation. The symbolic number for the **new creation** of God is thus three times four, which is twelve.

Were these descriptions true of the church only after the judgment of Rome? Of course not! The verses we just read show us that. These descriptions of the church have been true of the church from the day the church was established in Acts 2 and will remain true of the church through the great day when Jesus delivers the kingdom to God at the end of the world. There has never been a day since Acts 2 when the church was not the glorious kingdom of Christ built on a firm foundation.

The question we should ask is not whether these descriptions were true of the church during the Roman persecution, but rather we should ask whether the suffering persecuted first century church saw the church in this way. And we could also ask ourselves whether we see the church in this way! Do we? Did they? God wants us to see the church as he sees the church, which is to say that God wants us to see the church as it really is. And that is so important that that is how God ends the New Testament!

And, in my opinion, there has never been a time in the history of the church when it has been more difficult for the people of God to see the church as it really is than it is today. Yes, it was difficult in the first century, but in the first century the church was not surrounded on all sides by creations of men calling themselves churches! By one estimate there are nearly four hundred thousand such religious groups in the United States alone — each of them calling itself a church! We saw earlier a prophecy that Satan would regroup and try again after his defeat with Rome. Don't we see evidence of that all around us today? We know that this religious confusion has **not** been caused by God (1 Corinthians 14:33).

So how do we fight that confusion? How do we overcome Satan's attack? The same way the first century church did — by faith in God. Faith is the victory! And one way we demonstrate our faith in God is to see the church as God sees the church — to believe what God tells us about the church. If we see the church as just another denomination on a block filled with denominations, then faith will not be the victory for us. If we see the church as a footnote in history that is buffeted about by the kingdoms of men, then faith will not be the victory for us. If we see the church as weak and powerless, then faith will not be the victory for us.

What did Satan do the very first time we met him? He put the word "not" before something God had said. In Genesis 2:17, God said "thou shalt surely die." In Genesis 3:4, Satan said "ye shall **not** surely die." Satan is still doing the exact same thing today. God is telling us right here what the church is like. Satan is telling us that the church is **not** like that. **Will we believe God or Satan?** That was the question in Genesis 3, that is the question in Revelation 21, and that remains the question today. The very first step for the church to be effective in the world is for the church to see itself as it really is. Is it any wonder that Satan is trying so hard for us **not** see to ourselves as we really are?

Revelation 21:15-21

15 And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. 16 And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. 17 And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel. 18 And the building of the wall of it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. 19 And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; 20 The fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl: and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.

“In the land of endless day lies the city four-square; it shall never pass away and there is no night there.” That’s a well known hymn about heaven, but is the city foursquare in verse 16 heaven? We know it is not. In fact, we know it is not the church in heaven. Verse 2 tells us what we are seeing here — we are

seeing the holy city **coming down** from God **out of heaven**; we are seeing the church here on earth.

Will these beautiful descriptions be true of the church after the world has come to an end and Jesus has delivered the kingdom to God the Father? Yes. I think most of these descriptions will always be true of the church, whenever and wherever it is. But — and here is the key point — these beautiful descriptions apply to the church right here and right now!

Right here and right now we are the holy city of God, the new Jerusalem. Right here and right now, we are enjoying all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus. Right here and right now, we are the beautiful city foursquare. If we don't see ourselves that way, then we are suffering under the same misconceptions about the church that many of the suffering first century Christians seem to have had. And the cure? It is the same in each case — pick up and read the word of God! Let God tell us what the church is like!

Why is the city measured in verse 15? This measuring is based on Ezekiel's vision of the temple in Ezekiel 40-43. In that vision, the temple was carefully measured to stress its holiness and its separation from that which is common.

***Ezekiel 42:20** — He measured it by the four sides: it had a wall round about, five hundred reeds long, and five hundred broad, to make a separation between the sanctuary and the profane place.*

Earlier, in Revelation 11, we saw the temple measured for the same reason.

***Revelation 11:1** — And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein.*

The church is measured again here in Chapter 21 for the same reason — to stress its separation and its holiness.

***2 Corinthians 6:17** — Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.*

This part of the description should cause us to pause and meditate on what this means. God not only knows his church and loves his church, but God measures his church. **Do we measure up?** That is the question for the church of every age.

What are the measurements? Here we see some of the most beautiful and profound symbols in this book that is full of symbols.

First, we see that the holy city, the church, is a perfect cube — twelve thousand by twelve thousand by twelve thousand furlongs. There we see the symbol for God (the three dimensions of the cube), the symbol for God's people (twelve), and the symbol for completeness (one thousand). It is hard to understand how anyone could think that these measurements are literal: twelve thousand furlongs is about fifteen hundred miles! What that means is that the **height** of this city would be about the distance from Houston to Boston! I would hate to get stuck in that elevator! But, of course, we know that these numbers are not literal. We have studied the previous twenty chapters in this beautiful book, and we know that these numbers are symbolic, and we also know the symbols! This city contains all of the people of God! Twelve thousand by twelve thousand by twelve thousand! This city is the church!

Verse 17 tells us that the walls surrounding the city are 144 cubits high, which is about two hundred feet. We recognize the symbol number 144, which is twelve times twelve. We saw that same symbol used earlier when the church was described as the 144,000. The appearance of the two twelves may point to those in the church who lived faithfully under the old covenant combined with those in the church who live faithfully under the new covenant.

What is meant by the phrase at the end of verse 17: “according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel.” That is a difficult phrase, but Hailey may have the right answer:

The measure “according to a man, that is, of an angel,” is that it is a measure understood by man, one in common use by men, but in the hands of an angel.

Perhaps the verse is here simply to let us know that we are not seeing here the giant angel of Revelation 10, but rather we are seeing here an angel the same size as a man, and so the measurements made by the angel are the same type of measurements that a man would make.

That's possibly all that is intended by this phrase, but I think there is something else here as well. There may also be a reference back to Revelation 13:8 where we saw a similar phrase — “the number of a man.” There the focus was on Caesar and his false man-made religion. But was man himself the problem? Could there be no redemption for man? No. The problem was not man; the problem was sin. And so perhaps this verse is reminding us that men are in

the church just as men were in Rome. This angel is not using some heavenly system of measurement; he is using man's system of measurement. Why? Because men are in the church. The same men who persecuted the church could, if they repented and obeyed the gospel, find themselves in the church they were persecuting. It happened to Paul; it could happen to others as well. I think the end of verse 17 is reminding us that the church consists of people — ordinary people who have been set free by the blood of Christ.

Verse 18 tells us that the wall is made of jasper and that the city itself is made of pure gold that was like clear glass. Verses 19 and 20 tell us about the twelve foundations of the great city — each is made with a different precious jewel. Verse 21 tells us that the twelve gates of the city are made of pearl, and the streets of the city of made of pure gold like transparent glass.

Before we go any further, just stop for a moment and think about what such a city would look like. A giant cube of solid gold fifteen hundred miles in every direction glittering like glass and displaying every precious jewel.

It has been said that that which we dissect, we kill. And that would certainly be the case if we were to launch in to some type of word study on each of these precious jewels! We are not intended to do that. The symbol is the great city itself. The gold, the jewels, and the pearls are all just intended to stress the tremendous beauty of that great city.

Is this great city heaven? No. And that's not me saying that, that's verse 2 saying that. And that's all of these beautiful symbols for the church telling us that. These verses are describing the holy city of God, the new Jerusalem, as it celebrates its victory over Rome — the same victory that Daniel prophesied about in Daniel 2. The number twelve appears in every measurement — this city contains the people of God. This city is the church! **John is not describing a place; John is describing a people!**

So now let's go back and ask one more time the same question that we have asked over and over again in our study of this book — how does God see the church? When God looks down at this earth and sees the kingdoms of men churning like the restless waves of the ocean, how does God see the kingdom of his dear Son? Now, at last, we have the answer, and what an answer it is! When God looks down at this earth, he sees his church as a huge golden city with streets of gold and glittering with every sort of precious jewel!

Is that how we see the church? That's the real question. Do we see the church the same way that God sees the church? We don't if we think all of these beau-

tiful descriptions apply only to the church's final home in heaven rather than to the church itself whenever and wherever it is.

Yes, we are blessed here to have a beautiful building in which to worship — but the people inside this building are infinitely more beautiful than the brick and mortar that surrounds us. We are the city foursquare! We are the beautiful city of gold with streets of gold! That is how God sees us — and if that is how God sees us, then that is what we are!

Do we see ourselves as God sees us? Do we truly understand how **beautiful** the church is? Do we truly understand how **important** the church is? We often say that Revelation shows us things we can't see (heaven) in terms of things we can understand (golden streets), but is that really what it happening here? If these chapters are describing the church, then isn't God really describing something we **can** see (the church) — but isn't God then telling us that we are not seeing it as it really is! Isn't God telling us that we are not seeing the church as the beautiful, golden city of God that it is. These chapters are giving us God's view of his church — and if that view is not our view, then we need to change our view!

Why did God end the Bible with a description of the church? Perhaps because God knew that how we see ourselves in this world is the key to our effectiveness in this world. If we think the church is powerless against the great tides of history, then won't we be powerless? If we think the church just blends in with the worldly philosophies of the day, then won't we just blend in? If we think the great works of man are more attractive and more beautiful than the church, then won't we begin to doubt the relevance of the message we are proclaiming? But what if instead we see the church as God sees the church? What if we see the church for what it is — the most beautiful, most important, most relevant, most powerful organization on earth, unique and different from everything else on this earth? Won't that view change us? Perhaps that is why God ended the New Testament with a description of the church.

Revelation 21:22-27

22 And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. 23 And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did

lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. 24 And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. 25 And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. 26 And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. 27 And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Are we still looking at the church, or are we looking at heaven? And if we are looking at the church, are we looking at the church whenever and wherever, or are we looking at the church in heaven? I think verses 2 and 10 should answer those questions, but let's look at the text here in verses 22-27 and let these verses answer those questions.

Verse 23 confirms we are still looking at a city, and we have seen only two cities in this book — the city of Christ and the city of Caesar. The city of Caesar is no more, which means the only city left is the city of Christ, which is the church.

Verse 22 tells us that there is no temple in this city because God and the Lamb are the temple. What does that mean?

In the Old Testament the temple stressed the separation between God and man. God lived in the inner sanctuary where only the High Priest could enter. But in this city, God dwells with his people. In this city, there is no separation between God and man. In this city, every citizen has direct access to God through Jesus.

Is that true of the church right here and right now? Absolutely.

Hebrews 4:16 — Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 10:19 — *Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.*

Ephesians 3:12 — *In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.*

Will we enjoy those blessings in a different manner someday? Yes. Paul wrote of these blessings and yet he looked forward to the day when he would depart this life to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23). And yet, saying that we will enjoy these blessings differently someday does not change the fact that we are enjoying these blessings today. We have **boldness** and **access** (Ephesians 3:12).

Verse 23 tells us something else about this city — it has no need of the sun or the moon because the glory of God and the Lamb provide all of the light.

Isaiah uses very similar language to describe, not the end of the world, but the coming of Christ and his kingdom.

Isaiah 60:1-3 — *Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.*

Isaiah 60:19-20 — *The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.*

Is this true of the church here and now? Do we get all of our light from God and the Lamb?

2 Corinthians 4:6 — *For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

Ephesians 5:8 — *For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light.*

Ephesians 5:14 — *Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.*

Colossians 1:12-13 — *Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.*

James 1:17 — *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

1 John 1:5 — *This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*

The church is enjoying the blessing of verse 23 right here and right now. Will we enjoy them differently someday? Yes. But that doesn't mean we aren't also enjoying those blessings right here and right now. God "hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Verse 24 tells us that the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of this city, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into the city. What does that mean?

First, we should note that this description is not surprising given what we have seen earlier in this chapter. This great city has been described figuratively as a huge golden cube stretching fifteen hundred miles in every direction. Do you think something like that might attract some attention? I think we will all agree that it would attract a great deal of attention! We may sometimes see the church as obscure and overlooked, but that is not at all how God sees the church! It is not God's desire that his church be obscure and hidden.

Matthew 5:14 — *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.*

The Lord's church is that city set on a hill! And it is that city that we are reading about here in Revelation 21. And what does Jesus say about us? We "cannot be hid!"

God's view of the church and God's mission for the church is to be a beautiful golden city that reflects his glory and gives light to a lost and dying world — and nowhere is that message and that mission stated any more clearly than it is right here in these verses from Revelation 21. The church is the light of the world, but not with our own light. Instead, the church reflects the glory of God, and all nations flow to the church because of that glorious light.

Isn't this precisely what the great prophecy from Isaiah 2 says about the church?

Isaiah 2:2 — And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

But what does verse 24 mean when it says that nations shall walk in the light of the city, and the kings will bring their glory and honor into the city? It means just what Matthew 5:14 means — it means that the church is the light of this world. There is no other light in this world. And it means that Jesus, the head of the church, is worthy "to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (Revelation 5:12). Jesus does not come to nations and to kings; nations and kings come to Jesus. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16).

And, again, this is not a description of the church in the by and by; this is a description of the church in the here and now. In fact, does this part of the description even make sense if we tried to apply it to the end of the world? The church is the light of the world now, but will the church be the light of the world after this world is destroyed? And who are these kings of the earth and who are these nations if this is a description of the church after the end of the world?

And while we are on that topic, look at verse 25: "And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there." **The gates of this city are wide open!** Will that be true of the church after the end of time? If so, who will be coming in, and who will be leaving? I don't think there will be any need for the gates of the church to remain open after the end of time.

We quoted Isaiah 60 earlier with regard to the coming of Christ. That same chapter also uses the same language we see here.

Isaiah 60:11 — Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night; that men may bring unto thee the forces of the Gentiles, and that their kings may be brought.

Yes, those gates are open while the church is on this earth fulfilling the great commission, but will that still be true after the kingdom has been delivered to God and the earth has been destroyed?

Why are these gates open in verse 25? Verse 25 tells us — because there is no night there. The gates of a city were closed at night for security reasons. That is not necessary for the church because it is never night time in the church. God and the Lamb are always there, and they always provide light.

Verse 26 explains that the glory and the honor from verse 24 enter the city through these gates. Verse 21 told us that there are twelve gates and that each is made of pearl. Of course, these descriptions of the church are figurative. They describe the great beauty of the church, and they describe the glory and honor that enters the church for God and the Lamb.

Ephesians 3:21 — Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.

The first half of verse 27 tells us what will not enter this city. It tells us what will not come in through these gates. And what is it that will not enter in? “Any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie.”

What does that mean? We know what that means! Only those who have been made clean by the blood of Christ are allowed to enter this city. No one enters this city until he has followed the command of Acts 22:16 to be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord. The church is the body of Christ. People are added to the church when they are saved (Acts 2:47). If you have been saved, then you are in the Lord’s church. If you are not in the Lord’s church, it is because you are not saved. Those outside the Lord’s church are unclean; those inside the Lord’s church have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. The gates of this city are open — but you can enter those gates only after being cleansed by the blood of Christ.

And, yes, these gates are wide open now, but one day those gates will swing shut. One day there will no longer be an opportunity for anyone to enter. And

yet in verse 24 we see the kings of the earth entering the city — will that be possible after the end of the world?

What am I saying? What I am saying is that most of the descriptions of the church that we have seen could apply to the church here on earth or to the church in heaven after the end of the world — but not all of these descriptions can describe both. I think the descriptions in verses 24-26 apply to the church on earth, but I don't see how those descriptions can apply to the church in heaven after this earth has been destroyed. After all, who are the “kings of the earth” in verse 24 if there is no earth?

The final phrase in verse 27 tells us who can enter this city — “they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.” That's the book you want your name to be in! God knows those who are his, and their names are recorded in that book. If I am in the church but I fall away from Christ, what happens? Revelation 3:5 tells me that my name will be blotted out of this book — and verse 27 right here tells me that I will no longer be allowed to remain in this city; I will no longer be a part of the church. Yes, I can be restored, but until that happens verse 27 tells me that I am not in the church anymore. There are no lost people in the body of Christ!

So what have we seen in Chapter 21? This chapter has shown us the triumphant and victorious church on earth. The church shines among the nations and brings light to those living outside in darkness. The nations are drawn to it by the light that it casts. That description of the church will continue through the first five verses of Chapter 22.